The Essential Elements of Teacher Evaluation: Results of a District-Wide Survey in the Memphis City Schools

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Memphis City Schools is an intensive partnership site for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in a joint project to improve teacher effectiveness. The language and thought of Memphis’ Teacher Effectiveness Initiative (TEI) have been cited widely in the national conversation about teacher effectiveness and improved learning opportunities for students. This paper and the series of papers that will follow describe critical components of TEI implementation in order to share the lessons learned in Memphis with the local, state, national, and international education community.

Each paper is intended to be a briefing report that provides both high-level thoughts and actionable details relative to the work. Follow-up contact with the authors is welcomed and encouraged.

The Context

During an in-service day for all teachers on Monday, February 15, 2010, faculty in all Memphis City Schools received training on the components of the TEI via an 18-minute video that described the project in detail. Immediately following the video, teachers across the 111,000 student district completed a 16-question on-line survey designed by the members of the project’s Teacher Evaluation Working Group, which comprises teacher union representatives, principals, and district staff. The purpose of the survey was to assess the impact of the video and determine teacher perception about the essential elements of evaluation.

Of the 6,639 teachers employed by the district on February 15, a total of 5,767 (87%) responded to the survey. The high response rate was a product of principals monitoring survey completion – teachers were asked to share the last page with their school administrator to show they had submitted a survey – and teachers’ interest in contributing to the emerging TEI conversation.

The Results

Teachers were asked to respond to survey items on a Likert scale of 1 to 7, where scores at the lower end of the range (e.g., 1 through 3) indicated disagreement and scores at the higher end of the range (e.g., 5 through 7) indicated agreement. Ratings of 1 were interpreted as “strong disagreement” while ratings of 7 were interpreted as “strong agreement.” Patterns of results were analyzed and scores compared to evaluate teachers’ sense of agreement or disagreement with survey items.

**Teachers believe that research-based teacher evaluations are important.**  Sixty percent of teachers agreed that a research-based evaluation can improve a teacher’s practice and increase student learning. Two out of three teachers (67%) agreed or strongly agreed that the investment of time to conduct teacher evaluation was worth the effort.

**Teachers want to improve their practice.**  More than eight out of ten teachers (81%) agreed or strongly agreed that they want to improve their teaching. A nearly-equal number (78%) indicated that they believe
administrators support the improvement of teaching. Far fewer, but still a majority of teachers (58%) agreed that there was a high degree of trust between teachers and administrators.

**Teachers find every component of the Tennessee Teacher Evaluation useful.** Of nine components (e.g., Self-Assessment, Future Growth Plan, Educator Information Record) currently used in the Tennessee Teacher Evaluation model, teachers rated Self-Assessment the most useful to their teaching practice (84% agreeing or strongly agreeing) and Reflecting Information (81%) second most useful. The Unit/Lesson Plan Analysis was the lowest rated component (58%).

**Teachers believe the current teacher evaluation system should be improved.** Although teachers find components of the current teacher evaluation system useful, less than half (40%) of the teachers responding are satisfied with the evaluation system as a whole. Just over half (51%) agreed that the current teacher evaluation model is fair and one out of two (50%) felt that teacher evaluation had made them better teachers. In all, a majority of teachers (65%) indicated that the Tennessee Teacher Evaluation model used in Memphis and across the state should be improved.

**Teachers have clear ideas about how to enhance the evaluation process.** Asked to respond to a series of items that began “Teacher evaluation is enhanced when it includes a...”, teachers clearly indicated that measures of content knowledge (81%), teacher attendance (77%), pedagogical knowledge (72%), and student learning (68%) are the top four elements to include in teacher evaluation. A majority of teachers supported peer observation (60%), peer perspectives (59%), and student perspectives (53%). Measures not receiving a majority of teacher agreement were parent perspectives (47%) and extracurricular involvement (44%).

**The district-wide video substantially elevated teachers’ knowledge of TEI.** Three out of four teachers (74%) reported feeling knowledgeable about TEI after the video compared with 30% of teachers feeling knowledgeable before the video was shown. Nearly all teachers (80%) reported that their level of knowledge increased as the result of having seen the video.

**The Implications**

Survey results indicate teachers agree with the premise of the multi-dimensional evaluation model outlined in the TEI proposal. Specifically, the Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM) currently under development in Memphis emphasizes an evaluation of teacher effectiveness based on student achievement, classroom observation, teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, and the perspectives of peers, parents, and pupils. The scope of the TEM also provides for teacher self-reflection on the evidence assembled as a key component to the evaluative process.

The data shown here clearly indicate teachers’ strong desire to become more effective at their work, but the majority of teachers indicated that the current system needs to be improved in order for change to happen. With strong majorities calling for content knowledge, teacher attendance, pedagogical knowledge, and student learning measures as evaluation enhancements, discussions about how to include these elements in evaluation models should begin in earnest.

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